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Article Title: Why Albania needs to be your next European escape.

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<p>It doesn't top many people's holiday wish lists. When you think sun, sea and sand, Albania certainly isn't the first destination that comes to mind. Well, think again. Pack up your preconceptions and discover a country full of intrigue; its architecture, language and history weave together to create a cultural fabric unlike any other European destination. It's ripe for exploration and here's why...</p> <p><b>There's an entire coastline of gorgeous, deserted beaches</b></p> <p>Albania is home to some of the <a href="#">Mediterranean's</a> most pristine and unadulterated beaches. As the country sits sandwiched between <a href="#">Greece</a> and Montenegro, soft sandy shores and warm waters tickle its entire western side.</p>	<p>Preview the article, what are the five reasons to go to Albania:</p> <p>1 _____</p> <p>2 _____</p> <p>3 _____</p> <p>4 _____</p> <p>5 _____</p>
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A coastline so sparkling should be overrun with international visitors sunning themselves on the sands, but instead it's the locals (and a few Germans and Norwegians in certain spots) that enjoy these relatively quiet shores.

Development here is at its peak in cities such as [Sarandë](#) in the south and Durrës in the north, where high-rise concrete structures (many incomplete due to lack of funds) are an eyesore on the skyline. But head out into the coastal villages and you'll find a little Albanian paradise. Try the Cape of Rodon, near Durrës, for some deserted stretches of sand or, out of season, head to Ksamil in the south to have your pick of the pretty little coves.

Driving the coastal road is the best way to see Albania's oceanic offering. The north-to-south route affords the most dramatic views: wind your way up the mountainous Llogara Pass and you'll be rewarded with an astonishing vista over what seems like the entire southern coast.

### **There's a fascinating recent history most people know little about**

Now is the time to visit Albania, as there's a generation still around who will remember the oppressive and violent rule of Communist dictator Enver Hoxha all too well.

Hoxha's reign over Albania saw countless atrocities committed: cold-blooded murder, mass killings, horrific abuse in concentration camps and the stripping of almost everyone's human rights. The entire country, between the mid 1940s and late 80s, was closed to the outside world. Very few people made it in or out of Albania and international communications were severed.

This turbulent time, so rarely detailed in wider European history books or on school curriculums, is best understood through a visit to Bunk'Art – a 106-room underground bunker which is now a museum and art space in the capital, Tirana. Formerly built for government leaders and the military to escape nuclear attack, today the space is filled with eerie recordings of bombings and sirens as you wander through the small, cell-like rooms. Each displays a different part of the era that defined Albania's thirst for freedom today and local artists provide intriguing installations.

The National Histirucak Museum and National Art Gallery also have excellent and deeply moving depictions of some of Albania's toughest times, alongside a more comprehensive history of the country.

### **You can go even further back in time in old Ottoman towns**

Beyond the beaches and the capital, Albania's countryside is peppered with charming towns and cities that are such a pleasure to explore it's near impossible to leave them behind.

Gjirokastra, home of the revered author Ismail Kadare, clings to a hillside in the central part of the country, south of Tirana. Tall, Ottoman-style houses, built mostly in the 19th century, stand to attention on the steep, winding cobbled streets. A tour through one of them (Skenduli is the best) reveals intricate and ingenious interior designs: open, sociable reception rooms are backed by secret passageways and cupboards where women would deliver coffee and meals to the men of the house without being seen, and clever plumbing creates a natural sauna in the structure's centre.

A few hours north of Gjirokastra, the hilltop town of Berat is perhaps the country's most atmospheric. Housed within the walls of an old citadel, Kalasa, at the top of a seriously steep slope, this ancient maze of streets is still home to hundreds. Impressively preserved churches, some as old as 800 years, are dotted throughout the town. Come nighttime, strolling through its quiet, cobbled alleyways is a pleasantly mysterious experience.

Closer to the capital, the old town of Kruja is steeped in history being the nucleus of national hero Skanderbeg's resistance to the Ottomans in the 15th century. The a wonderful bazaar that leads to the old castle sells everything from silver jewellery to antique furniture and makes for a fun place to bargain.

### **You can take one of the world's most beautiful boat trips**

In the far north a Valbona is one of the most beautiful places in Albania. Tucked amongst the Dinaric Alps, the mountains strike up from the floor like shards of broken glass and the river runs a perfect cyan through its centre. Views are stunning at all angles and fresh trout is available everywhere you go. With excellent trekking opportunities for all abilities and some true rural living experiences, it's a highlight on any itinerary, but it's also one of the hardest to reach places in the country.

The journey, however, is worth it – and not just for the destination. The three-hour ferry from Koman to Fierze takes you deep into the north Albanian countryside and just when it seems impossible that people might survive somewhere so remote, the occasional farmstead punctures the lush green hillsides, defying all expectations.

### **There's food for all palates**

Albanian food cobbles together some of the best bits of Turkish, Italian and Slavic cuisine. Everyday staples include qoftë (pronounced chof-tuh), a grilled minced lamb sausage, spit-roasted lamb kebabs and kos (yoghurt). But there's a huge amount of variety on offer in restaurants throughout the country: seafood is plentiful along the coast, in the form of risotto or pasta dishes, and piquant vegetarian plates such as feta-stuffed aubergine or fergesë (a mix of cheese, egg, onions and tomatoes) – along with traditional Mediterranean salads – bring a pleasing freshness to a meal.